WORLD

UK government unit allegedly steered narratives to ethnic tensions

According to media reports, a British unit of government is said to have specifically worked towards influencing the public perception of protests, terrorist attacks and ethnically charged conflicts.

By **Editorial** (mš)

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The protests after the knife attack on Stephen Ogilvie are at the centre of new allegations against the British government unit RICU. According to media reports, this narrative is said to have affected ethnic tensions. *(Image: IMAGO / ZUMA Press)*

London. – As the British *Daily Mail* reports, a little-known unit of the British Home Office is to play a central role in managing public debates about ethnic tensions and migration. The focus is on the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), which was originally founded to combat extremist propaganda.

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Founded in 2007, the division is part of Britain's anti-terrorism strategy "Prevent" and dates back to former MI6 officer Charles Farr. Officially, the RICU analyzes extremist propaganda and its spread on the Internet. However, critics accuse the unit of exceeding its tasks and specifically influencing the public perception of social conflicts.

According to *the Daily Mail*, RICU has become active most recently after the riots in Northern Ireland as a result of the severe knife attack on Stephen Ogilvie by a Sudanese. According to the report, the unit has advised the police on how to control the public narrative around the riots. A source claimed to *the Daily Mail* that RICU was working with the intelligence department of the Police Service of Northern Ireland to identify organizers of protest calls on the Internet and develop communication strategies. The aim was to make participants appear as violent rioters instead of protesters.

Accusations of influence on victims' families

According to the report, the agency is also said to have advised the police after the murder of Henry Nowak. A source told the newspaper that RICU had ensured that the liaison teams responsible for the relatives were prepared accordingly. In addition, the unit is accused of influencing and even co-writing statements from victims' families in incidents that could trigger ethnic tensions. According to the source, numerous statements by relatives show similar formulations and pitches, which indicate coordinated communication.

Within the British administration, RICU is considered to be out of control for some

officials, according to the newspaper. The support of so-called “non-crime hate incidents” was particularly controversial. These are police recordings of statements that do not comply with a criminal offence, but are potentially offensive or discriminatory. Later, the British government refrained from this practice and called on the police authorities to no longer systematically record everyday disputes and discussions on the Internet.

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Concealed campaigns after terrorist attacks

The *Daily Mail* describes several cases in which RICU is said to have acted covertly on the public mood after terrorist attacks. After the attack on London Bridge in 2017, covert employees would have distributed flowers to promote an atmosphere of grief rather than anger. In addition, posters with messages such as “#TurnToLove”, “#ForLondon” and “#LoveWillWin” were placed in the area.

After the murder of the British development worker Alan Henning by the terrorist organization “Islamic State”, the unit is reported to have used a specially created

camouflage organization to place certain image motifs in the media. Another case from 2016 seems particularly unusual. According to the report, RICU secretly funded a pop group that appeared in schools in Muslim-influenced communities and presented songs with messages against radicalization.

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Even after the 2017 attack near the Finsbury Park Mosque, the authority is said to have indirectly influenced the reporting. According to research by the newspaper, a communication campaign was organized through an agency funded by RICU. The authority was also instrumental in the dissemination of the hashtag "#WeStandTogether", which was subsequently taken up by politicians, police representatives and other public actors. According to the report, the unit regularly uses social networks to influence discussions in the social milieus it defines.

Focus on right-wing positions prompts criticism

According to critics, the political focus of the authority is particularly controversial. Former head of the British Prevent review, William Shawcross, explained in a 2023 report that the threshold for observing Islamist content appears comparatively high, while content from the right-wing spectrum would be captured significantly faster.

An internal document was also caused by a stir, in which works by Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, among others, were said to have been mentioned as texts that were of interest to white nationalists. Television programs such as "Great British Railway Journeys", "The Thick Of It" and "Yes Minister" were also listed as possible indicators of susceptibility to right-wing views. Former Conservative Minister Michael Portillo asked in light of these revelations why senior officials would not stop such events before they embarrass the government.

Security experts see grey area

Security expert Anthony Glees described RICU, according *to the Daily* Mail, as an organization moving in a hard-to-see gray area between the duties of the Home Office and those of the domestic intelligence agency MI5. Former Cabinet Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg also drew sharp criticism. He accused the authority of using

Jacob Rees-Mogg also drew sharp criticism. He accused the authority of using resources on democratically elected politicians rather than focusing on actual endangerers. A spokesman for the British Ministry of the Interior, on the other hand, said that RICU is providing analyses of the use of propaganda by extremists and their activities on the Internet to support the British system of counter-terrorism. The ministry did not comment on specific operations.